



## Researching the History of Your Home

The City of Webster Groves was established in 1896. Its homes however were built from the mid-1800s to the present. Historic homes and commercial buildings are found throughout the Webster Groves area. The City currently includes five historic districts, all with a housing blend of age and architectural style. Webster Groves residents appreciate the home-town feel, beautiful neighborhoods, and the historic nature of their community.

For many homeowners, an appreciation and curiosity for their surroundings creates an interest in the history of their own homes. You may have questions, such as: When was my house built? What did my home originally look like? How did it compare to the rest of the neighborhood? Who was the original owner? How many owners have there been through the years? Who were these previous owners? What changes did these owners make to the house over the years?

The Historic Preservation Commission offers assistance in researching a home's history by recommending the following approach:

- **Start with what you know:** Begin with your street address and property description, and, if applicable, the abstract you received at the real estate closing when you bought the property.
- **Property and People:** Follow two distinct paths as you research: 1) the physical property and building(s), keeping in mind that street names and numbers sometimes change; 2) the owners (people, families, etc.). Work in reverse chronological order starting with the most recent owner.
- **Compile and document as you go:** Make copies of everything you find. Place everything in a binder.
- **Look closely at your home:** Construction gives clues. Items such as basement footprints, walls, attic rafters, decorative moldings, flooring material, exterior siding, window construction, and the overall style of the home give clues to its

history, transformation and age. Some of these items may help you narrow down the date of construction.

- **Explore the Neighborhood:** Does the house appear similar to others in the neighborhood? Is it the same size, streetscape and setback as others? Sometimes identical homes are built within the same neighborhood, other times they are similar with a “mirror image” floor plan. These are typically built in the same era, by the same builder. Sometimes determining the age of one home may provide clues to the ages of other similar homes in the area.
- **Talk to people:** Talk to neighbors to see if they know the area history, previous owners of your home, and anything unique about the neighborhood. Long-term residents may remember changes made to your home. Make sure everyone in your neighborhood knows about your research project, just in case anyone has pertinent information.
- **Check historic district status:** Refer to the Webster Groves city map for the various district locations and boundaries.
- **Brochures:** Look at the various brochures on the City of Webster Groves website, such as the Historic Walk brochures.

The activities listed above are only the beginning of a homeowner’s search for the history of a home. For some this is enough, but there are additional resources available, if you want to delve deeper:



Hawken House

### **Webster Groves Historical Society**

The Historical Society has compiled several pamphlets that contain descriptive walking tours around various areas within Webster Groves. Each pamphlet includes information about homes along the walk, citing history and stories of former occupants and important architectural styles and craftsmanship techniques.

Additionally, the Society has done extensive research and compiled a list of homes that are 100 years old or older; these are referred to as Century Homes. Plaques recognizing Century Homes can be found on homes sprinkled throughout the City. The plaques indicate the original owner and the year the home was constructed. A list of the Century homes can be found on the City website or on the historical Society website. <http://historicwebster.org/>



Webster Groves Public Library

### **Webster Groves Public Library**

The reference section of the Library contains binders about each of the historic districts, including their charter, formation, and information about each contributing home within the districts. The Webster Groves Public Library is also home to the Kate Moody Collection on microfilm, which has a variety of information contained within it. Libraries are a great place to look for physical records including legal records, deeds, fire insurance maps and other maps, vital records, obituaries, census records, tax records, phone book listings, and family and community information that can be found in newspaper clippings, photos, yearbooks, etc. Other libraries to visit are the St. Louis County Library Headquarters and the St. Louis Mercantile Library located at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. <http://www.wgpl.lib.mo.us/>; [www.slcl.org](http://www.slcl.org/); [www.umsl.edu/~merclib/](http://www.umsl.edu/~merclib/)

### **Building Commissioner, City of Webster Groves**

The office has documentation about homes within the historic districts and in other areas of the city. <http://www.webstergroves.org/directory.aspx>

### **House History Research Guidebooks**

- Gravenhorst, Edna Campos. *Historical Home Research in the City of St. Louis* (St. Louis: .C. Gravenhorst, 2003).
- Wolterman, Kim. *Who's Been Sleeping in My Bed(room)?: Researching a St. Louis County, Missouri Home* (St. Louis: Provenance Publishing, 2009).
- Morris, Ann. *How to Research the History of Your Webster Groves House* (St. Louis: Webster Groves Historical Society, 1980).

### **House History Article**

Northcott, Dennis. "How Well Do You Know Your Home?" *Times of Skinker DeBaliviere* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 6 [available at [http://sdtimes.org/files/Download/SD\\_Times2007\\_09.pdf](http://sdtimes.org/files/Download/SD_Times2007_09.pdf)]

### **House History Maps**

Sanborn Maps, fire district maps that date back to the 1800's, are available through the St. Louis Public Library (downtown branch), St. Louis County Library Headquarters (not all editions and years) and the Library of Congress. <http://www.slpl.org/> and <http://www.loc.gov/library/>

### **St. Louis County Department of Revenue**

To access real estate information, enter the address, name or locator number to view the assessment date and then check the property data. The County records should show a date when the house was built. This date does not always agree with the dates from the Webster Groves Historical Society or other references. The difference often can be explained by time entry in county records. Many records were entered in 1900, even though the actual date that the house was built was a few years earlier. <http://revenue.stlouisco.com/collection/ppinfo/>

A visit to the St. Louis County records building in Clayton may also be helpful. This building contains original plat books dating back to the late 1800's. Also, records of all county real estate transactions can be found on microfilm in the reference room in this location.



Missouri History Museum

### **Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center**

The Genealogy and Local History Index includes documents, published material and photographs. The Research Center also has a lot of city directories, telephone books and other wonderful reference materials.

### **St. Louis Death Registers 1850-1908**

The St. Louis Genealogical Society maintains a CD that comprises an index of deaths recorded in the City and County for the years ranging from 1850 to 1908. This is available through the Society and through the Special Collections Department at the St. Louis County Library Headquarters.

Additional information may be obtained through the Preservation Research Office, the Landmarks Association, and the City of St. Louis; the Missouri State Preservation Learning Portal includes information on laws and government agencies that are helpful.

### **What to do with your research**

After you have completed your research, start a new chapter in your home's history by documenting the home under your years of ownership. (Someday, someone will be wondering just who you were!) Include photos of the outside and inside and any changes you make to the home. A photo of your family in front of the home would be extra special. Keep these in the binder. If you sell your home, be generous and share your knowledge. You keep the originals but leave a copy of the binder with the house, asking the next homeowner to add to the binder and keep it with the house if they ever sell. For safekeeping, please donate a copy of the binder to the Webster Groves Historical Society or Webster Groves Historic Preservation Commission.

